Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) in Indian Higher Education: Implementation, Reforms, and Future Directions under NEP 2020

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Abstract

The Government of India announced the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) approximately five and a half years ago with the aim of transforming, innovating, and reforming the education sector. The policy seeks to address the evolving developmental imperatives and the diverse educational needs of India and its people. This policy incorporates concrete and forward-looking provisions ranging from primary education to higher education. Among these provisions, the concept of the credit system, also known as the 'Choice Based Credit System (CBCS)', is most prominent and significant, and its uniform implementation has been made mandatory in every programme (degree/diploma) at the level of higher education. Prior to this, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India followed undergraduate, postgraduate, and Ph.D. coursework programmes without a formal credit framework. However, according to the current education policy, NEP 2020, it is compulsory for all Higher Education Institutions to operate academic programmes as per the credit system along with the 'semester system' (that is, a shift from the annual to the half-yearly/semester system). Therefore, the main objective of the present paper is to present an in-depth review of CBCS/credit system. Along with this, clearly explain and elaborate upon various points to CBCS. This paper is a narrative review prepared by analyzing various relevant educational materials and sources. The study found that CBCS can be effective through practical and student-friendly strategies based on the needs of institutions, students, and teachers, which promote quality learning and sustainable educational growth. On the basis of the findings of the present review paper, it is suggested that CBCS will work better when institutions follow practical, student-friendly approaches, keeping course selection and assessment easy to understand. Continuous teacher training and strong digital support systems can help improve learning quality and long-term educational development.

Keywords

C.B.C.S, Credit system, Semester system, Innovation in education, National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), Higher Education, Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs).

Introduction:

For the future of humanity and the planet, everyone needs to come together to invest in education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023), because education is key to human well-being and sustainable development, and it is also a human right, a public good, and a shared public responsibility (United Nations [UN], 2025). Furthermore, it is the foundation of societies, economies, and the capabilities of every individual, and a universal human right (UN, 2023). Nelson Mandela described it should be used as the 'most powerful weapon' to change the world (Bansal, 2020). The importance of education can also be understood as the 'power to transform lives' every day and in every corner of society (UNESCO, n.d.); however, the education system itself needs to evolve to address challenges the world is facing today, and in future. It is well known that after India's independence, the Government of India (GoI) made unparalleled efforts

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and made significant changes periodically, to overcome the shortcomings in education, to face the challenges of the time and to build a better future (Shukla, 2019). The major significant outcomes of these efforts is the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India [MHRD, GoI], 2020). This policy has the potential to strengthen and positively transform India's 'cultural values', 'traditions', and 'social practices/ ethos' (Singh & Devi, 2022). Although India is economically stronger than many European countries, the structure of higher technical and management education appeared weak and unstable before the introduction of 'NEP 2020' (Singh, 2017). The new policy aims to address these shortcomings, create a stronger and more effective education system for the country's future.

Due to the strong intentions and effective policies of the GoI, India is likely to become a powerful developed nation by the year-2047 (Barré & Perruche, 2023). In this context, a report by the Press Information Bureau (PIB) states that, because of India's visionary policies, the country is projected to become the world's third-largest economy in four-to-five years (PIB, 2023a). Similarly, a Gold Mansachs (2023) report predicts that, by 2075, India will become the second-largest economy in the world, with an estimated value of 52.5 trillion US dollars. Along with economic growth, India's population size also plays a major role in shaping its future; based on the latest report of the United Nations Population Fund (2023), India has become the most populous country in the world, with a population of about 1.428 billion people. This large population is strongly reflected in the country's education sector. In higher education, India has 1,168 universities and 45,473 colleges, serving around 43.3 million students, supported by nearly 1.6 million teachers (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2022). In accordance to Unified District Information System for Education Plus (2024), the school level, there are more than 1.47 million schools, educating about 268 million students, with the help of approximately 9.5 million teachers. These data demonstrate that, Education in India is deeply connected to its economic progresses, population growth, and national development, making strong educational policies and reforms extremely important for the country's future.

Keeping in mind India's readiness to become a nation with a large economy, massive population, and an extensive education system, the first National Education Policy of the 21st century (NEP 2020), was announced on 29 July 2020. The main goal of this policy is to meet the growing developmental imperatives and needs of India and its people (Ministry of Education, 2021). A key feature of NEP 2020 is the plan to implement a uniform grading system in higher education through the Choice Based Credit System on a wide scale, and the revision of CBCS is one of the policy recommendations aimed at instilling innovation and flexibility in higher education (MHRD, GoI, 2020; University Grants Commission [UGC], 2022b). This policy has garnered global attention due to its forward-looking and progressive provisions; one of important goals is to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education from 26.3 percent in 2018 to 50 percent by 2035; to achieve this target, the policy also proposed to add 35 million new seats in HEIs (PIB, 2020). These steps clearly reflect India's strong commitment to strengthening its higher education system and preparing it for future national and global challenges.

Nearly, 5.5 year have passed since the implementation of this new policy (NEP 2020), and this important policy is now clearly bringing transformational changes to India's education system. It is empowering students, teachers, and educational institutions by opening new paths for meaningful reform. From holistic learning to skill development, the policy points toward sustainable and brighter future for future generations (Jaiswal, 2024). The Education policy (2020) also begun to shift thinking from what are our rights? to what are our responsibilities? (PIB, 2023b); its message is clear and powerful focus on duty, takes responsibility, and contributes actively. This change in mindset reflects the deeper goal of NEP 2020 to build not only educated individuals, but also responsible and committed citizens.

The main objective of this review paper is to conduct an in-depth study on CBCS system in HEIs from an Indian perspective. In addition to this primary aim, the study has several well-defined objectives, as explained, are: (i) to clearly explain the concept of the grading system; (ii) to develop a comprehensive understanding about the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS); (iii) to clarify the concepts of the CBCS and the semester system; (iv) to critically present and analyze the key features and strengths of the CBCS system; (v) to highlight the major challenges faced during the implementation of the CBCS system, and (vi) to provide important suggestions for the successful implementation of CBCS in higher education.

To find the above-mentioned objectives, a wide range of articles, research papers, and government reports were searched and studied using relevant keywords from Google, Google Scholar, LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Academia, and websites of different publishers in India and abroad, along with official government databases such as the Ministry of Education, GoI, UGC, PIB, UDISE+AISHE, and other national and international governmental repositories. The narrative review was prepared on the basis of systematic and thorough studies of the articles, research papers and government reports.

Credit System:

To bring equality, efficiency, and excellence into India's higher education system, the GoI and UGC have made continuous and sincere efforts. Consequently, these initiatives have, clear improvements, innovations, and reforms have been introduced in academic standards, including curriculum design, teaching learning processes, examinations, and evaluation systems (Kumari, 2020). Earlier, universities in India followed different methods of examination, assessment, and grading; this was largely due to the extensive diversity within the higher education system (Thornton et al., 2010); to reduce these differences and create uniformity, NEP 2020 recommended the implementation of a common grading system across Higher education institutions (HEIs). The grading system is considered more effective than the traditional marks-based system (UGC, 2014; PIB, 2014; Sinha, 2023), therefore, it is extensively used in 'leading educational institutions in India, and abroad (UGC, 2014; PIB, 2014; Yadav, 2018). This shift supports 'transparency', 'fairness', and 'consistency' in student evaluation and helps improve the overall 'quality of higher education'.

This system (CBCS) further helps in reducing the 'mental workload' of teachers (Bhargav, 2013); in this framework students are evaluated based on their exam performance, and their results are calculated as a 'Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA)', this method is commonly known as the 'grading system' or 'uniform grading system' (UGC, 2014; Mishra, 2017; PIB, 2014). In this regard, the UGC, issued guidelines as early as 2014 for the adoption of the Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS) under the credit framework by Central, State, and Deemed to be Universities for all undergraduate (B. A. / B. Sc. / B.Com., etc.) and postgraduate /masters-level (M.A. /M. Sc./ M. Com) degree, diploma, and certificate programmes (UGC, 2014; PIB, 2014).

This was presented in NEP 2020 in a comprehensive manner with the objective of bringing innovation and flexibility into higher education; subsequently, taking into account the recommendations of NEP 2020, the UGC developed the Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes for the implementation of a uniform credit system (UGC, 2022a; PIB, 2025). UGC has requested to implement this new CBCS framework in all the HEIs (UGC, 2022b); thereafter, on April 10, 2023, the National Credit Framework (NCrF) was launched to facilitate flexible credit accumulation across academic and vocational learning, and to support lifelong education (PIB, 2025; UGC, n.d.; UGC, 2023). This step reflects a clear commitment toward creating a uniform, flexible, and student-centered credit system across higher education ecosystem in India.

Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) and Semester System:

HEIs in India is progressively transitioning' from traditional annual examination system to the semester system (Mishra, 2017; Babu & Subhash, 2020), This change is taking place because the annual system did not give students enough flexibility to choose subjects according to their interests (Biswas, 2018; Rajivlochan & Rajivlochan, 2018; Hooda, 2022; Vishal, 2023); in contrast, the semester system provides a more convenient and effective platform for teaching and learning. Compared to the annual system, the semester system speeds up the teaching learning processes and allows both vertical and horizontal mobility in learning (Karthikeyan, 2015; Parliament of India, Rajya Sabha, 2016; Koner, 2018; Babu & Subhash, 2020). It divides academic year into 2 terms/parts, known as semesters, with primary objective of breaking the syllabus into smaller units and ensuring regular and continuous evaluation of students (Miller, 2024). In practice, the semester system focuses on time-based and ongoing assessment, while the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) promotes a student-centered approach and learning based on individual interest, it has been implemented alongside the semester system to enhance flexibility, quality, and overall effectiveness in higher education.

The Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) gives students the 'freedom' to choose their preferred courses from a structured curriculum; these options include core (major) courses, elective courses, minor courses, and skill-based programs (Sinha, 2023; Vishal, 2023); this flexibility enables students to tailor their education to their interests and career goals, while also allowing course design and teaching to be structured around teaching hours and assigned credits (Aithal & Kumar, 2016; Kapur, 2017; Bhattacharjee et al., 2017; Rani, 2022; Ranjan, 2022; Agarwal & Devi, 2022; Sinha, 2023); this helps institutions design more balanced and meaningful academic programs. Overall, this system shifts the focus from a teacher-centered approach to a 'student-centered approach' of education, by emphasizing innovation and flexibility, CBCS encourages active learning, creativity, and personalized academic growth, making higher education more responsive to students' needs and aspirations (Kelkar & Ravishankar, 2014; Bhattacharjee et al., 2017; Shivaramaiah, 2018; Chakraborty & Bhaskar, 2021, Sinha, 2023).

According to the new CBCS framework Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes, December, 2022 Page 9, Para. 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, one semester will consist of 90 days, and there will be two semesters in one academic year. The summer term will be of 8 weeks during the summer vacation. For students who wish to exit after completing two semesters or four semesters of study,

internships/ apprenticeships /work-based vocational education, and training can be organized during the summer term. Under this new framework, the concept of 'Major' and 'Minor' subjects has been introduced. In the Major subject, it will be mandatory to earn a prescribed number of credits (approximately 50% of the total credits) through courses, whereas in the Minor subject, a student will be required to earn a minimum of 12 credits from a set of courses (UGC, 2022a).

Features/Advantages of CBCS:

A detailed review of research studies shows that students, teachers, and institutions clearly benefit from the implementation of the CBCS in the higher education system. CBCS is often described as the foundation of learner-centered reforms, as it helps meet students' academic needs and career aspirations (Chaubey, 2015; Mallick & Paroi, 2019); this system supports the overall development of learners (Sumitha et. al., 2016), and helps shape their multi-dimensional personalities (Hasan & Parvez, 2015); It also contributes significantly to achieving the purpose of professional growth through education (Nehru, 2016). CBCS is considered a fair and balanced system because it allows students to 'learn at their own pace' (Sanghi, 2010); in addition, the system gives students the freedom to study according to their interests, making learning more meaningful and engaging' (Naidu & Sreedevi, 2016; Aithal & Kumar, 2016; Kapur, 2017; Bhattacharjee et al., 2017; Rani, 2022; Ranjan, 2022; Agarwal & Devi, 2022), by offering flexibility, choice, and a student-focused approach, CBCS strengthens the quality and relevance of higher education.

Another important benefit of this system is that it can reduce the gap in opportunities between students from rural institutions and specialized educational institutions (Nathial, 2022); from the perspectives of student autonomy, learner-centered education, transparent evaluation, clear curriculum structure, availability of institutional resources, and overall development, the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) plays a very important role (Sumitha et. al., 2016; Hasan & Parvez, 2015); CBCS also helps in maintaining and improving the quality/standard of college/university or higher education (Hooda, 2022; Bhat, 2018). Through this system, undergraduate students are able to learn more effectively and deeply, and transform themselves, as it offers a flexible, enriched, and blended learning environment with strong support for skill development and practical training (Katoch, 2017). In fact, CBCS is a supportive and effective education system because it allows students to shape their academic and professional path according to their personal interests and life goals (Mal & Mahato, 2021).

This system helps in eliminating the inherent disparities in higher education (Arti & Verma, 2022), Moreover, the presence of the CBCS credit system in higher education is essential because it promotes integrity among teachers and students, eliminates rote learning, and brings creativity and innovation into the education system (Sarkar, 2019); along with this, it also assists in the development of students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (Deuri, 2015). CBCS is especially important because most students show a 'positive attitude toward' it and are willing to adopt this new system (Howlader & Roy, 2021); it increases students' seriousness toward their studies, which makes it essential/imperative for higher education (Katoch, 2017). The system not only helps bridge the gap between professional and social performance, but also provides holistic education (Sinha, 2023). Overall, CBCS is a progressive and forward-looking approach that offers students diverse learning opportunities, making higher education more meaningful, flexible, and effective (Kumar & Anuradha, 2022).

Challenges in Implementation of CBCS:

As regards the benefits of CBCS, the facts discussed above indicate that this new concept adopted in higher education encompasses numerous possibilities for students' development. However, if attention is drawn to its other side, it is undeniable that in implementing, adopting, and operating the provisions of CBCS, many academic institutions (along with the student community and the government) are certainly likely to face several difficulties and challenges (Hasan & Parvez, 2015; Chaubey, 2015; Habib, 2015; Deuri, 2015; Aithal & Kumar, 2016; Lalrinzuali & Vadhera, 2017; Kapur, 2017; Biswas, 2018).

On the basis of CBCS, repeatedly preparing quarterly/ mid-term, and half-yearly question papers at short intervals, arranging examinations, conducting internal assessments, and maintaining compatibility between major and minor subjects is a challenging task. Therefore, it can be said that this system may increase the workload on teachers (Hasan & Parvez, 2015). Several courses have furthermore been imposed under this system, which proves to be highly burdensome for students. In addition, the lack of basic infrastructure in educational institutions such as buildings, smart classrooms, laboratories, and other practical facilities can also adversely affect the implementation of CBCS (Chaubey, 2015). With the implementation of this system, students also have to face numerous difficulties and challenges due to specific issues such as an excessive number of courses, examinations, lack of resources, and untrained teachers (Kumar & Mishra, 2021). The implementation of CBCS can sometimes create problems instead of solving them. Moreover, CBCS may lead to increase stress among student; a large number of tests, assignments, presentations, and both oral and written examinations place heavy academic pressure on learners, which in turn affects their 'mental well-being' if not managed properly (Lalrinzuali & Vadhera, 2017).

Critics argue that by implementing CBCS, higher education may be moving into a difficult situation; they believe that, often unknowingly, this system interferes with the core spirit of independent and autonomous universities (Hasan & Parvez, 2015; Kapur, 2017). From this perspective, CBCS is also seen in the context of a neo-liberal agenda that is gradually turning post-secondary education in India from a public good into a market-driven product, in the name of improving quality (Habib, 2015). This growing commercialization of education may weaken the autonomy and credibility of colleges and universities, making them less meaningful over time (Kapur, 2017); some concerns remain that the system does not offer a strong or effective evaluation mechanism (Deuri, 2015). Giving excessive importance to continuous or internal assessment may reduce students' seriousness toward final examinations; in addition, the grading system, which often minimizes visible differences in performance, may discourage talented/ god-gifted and creative students (Lalrinzuali & Vadhera, 2017).

In fact, this system offers a too many subject choices, which may also confuse students, as they may not know 'what to choose' and 'what not to choose' or 'struggle' to decide which courses to select and which to avoid (Biswas, 2018). Based on these concerns, it can be concluded that the implementation of CBCS may create various challenges and problems for both HEIs & students if not carefully planned, managed and executed.

Suggestions given by previous studies:

To facilitate the smooth, effective, and successful implementation of CBCS in all HEIs, while also maintaining the quality of higher or college/ university level education, it is essential to adopt well- planned and forward- looking measures. First, every aspect of the CBCS system should be clearly explained to students so as to fully understand how it works. Educational institutions should ensure adequate infrastructural support to every department and facilitate additional discussion time, and interaction between teachers and students (Katoch, 2017). To build proper awareness, seminars, debates, and discussions should be organized for students, while orientation programs, workshops, and conferences should be conducted for teachers to explain the strengths and limitations of the CBCS, grading system, and semester system (Biswas, 2018; Hooda, 2022; Katoch, 2017; Vishal, 2023; Mhatre, 2022; Bhat, 2018). Most importantly, teachers must receive professional training related to CBCS so they can manage the system effectively. Such capacity-building efforts will help institutions implement CBCS more efficiently and ensure that it truly supports meaningful learning and academic excellence.

Both the grading system and the percentage system need to be retained; the credit or grading system should not be 'compulsory', but instead remain optional or choice-based, so that students can select the method of 'learning and evaluation' that suits them best (Vishal, 2023). There is also a strong need to provide greater autonomy to HEIs; this will allow them to take independent decisions related to course options, subject selection, and examination processes, especially for programs that are not based on Cumulative Grade Point Average-CGPA (Das, 2021). In institutions where there is a shortage of teachers, the government should appoint new faculty members as soon as possible; this will ensure that activities such as quarterly or mid-term tests, examination management, and evaluation under CBCS can be carried out smoothly and without interruption (Molla & Sarkar, 2020).

Conclusion:

Based on the above discussion, it can be said that as the world and natural environment continue to change, the education system must also evolve. Such change is necessary to meet current demands, fulfill students' basic needs, and support their overall development (including essential academic and human values, which refer to the Seven R's and the Four H's.). However, before introducing any major reform, it is extremely important to make students and teachers aware of the change and to develop a positive attitude toward it. A careful review of earlier research shows that, on one hand, the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) can make students and teachers more successful in the teaching learning process and help achieve the broader goals of education; on the other hand, its implementation may also create several difficulties and challenges for both students and teachers. In conclusion, CBCS can be made effective and beneficial in the present context if strong, practical, and student-friendly strategies are adopted, by keeping in mind the basic needs of educational institutions, students, and teachers involved in higher education, CBCS can be implemented in a positive and balanced manner that supports quality learning and sustainable educational growth.

Author Contributions:

N.K.M. contributed to conception of the study, writing, and plagiarism checking; N.K.M., V.K.M., A.B., and R.P.G. contributed to organization and structuring of the review content; P.S.Y. and K.Y. contributed to the comprehensive collection of materials from various sources; K.S. and S.G. conducted the literature search, including review papers, articles, and reports; S.K.S. and R.M. screened and selected relevant literature; N.K.M. and V.K.M. drafted the initial manuscript and wrote the first draft; A.B. and R.P.G. contributed to correction and supervision of the study; R.P.G. approved the language editing, manuscript formatting, final review, proofreading, and the final submitted version.

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